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No Longer Loss

Autoethnographic Stammering

Jonathan Wyatt

This paper is

A stuttering

A stammering

A searching for words
Words that break,
That go beyond what is written,
That look for angles and lines of flight

(See Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze and Parnet 2002).

Introduction

This paper concerns loss. In particular, it considers my experience of the loss of my father, who died in September 2003. I have talked and written about him before (Wyatt, 2006, 2005a and 2005b) and, here, I explore my continuing – but changing – engagement with his loss.

I tell stories about my father as I struggle with understanding the sense that I currently have of his becoming increasingly distant: whereas I used to think about him regularly, I now catch myself not doing so, maybe for days. This 'absence' disturbs me – it is another loss – and I search for him, and for understanding, through the telling of stories: writing both as method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) and as therapy (Mazza, 2001). Amongst the stories, woven between them, are questions, questions sometimes provoked by others whose writings affect and influence me. One of these others is the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. I plug into Deleuze (St Pierre, 2004). I use his words, phrases, figures and images to make sense – and to make no sense – of my experience. In the weave is not only questioning therefore, but theory. Echoing Adams (2006), I think with theory because I find that theory helps in the task of living, and losing, well (Madison, 1999).

I see this paper as *stammering*. This Deleuzian term is not about an effort to enunciate but about the struggle within language, or *of* language, to create meaning. There is not a meaning 'out there' to be captured in words. Words don't come, or they aren't there, or they aren't adequate. Deleuze proposes that stammering also offers hope, a *line of flight*, because stammering might take me along paths other than where I intend (Deleuze, 2002).

I stammer in my exploration of loss.

I type.

I usually type.

But this is different. With this I have been, until now, writing by hand. I have stayed away from what has felt like the harshness and constraint of the screen. I have held onto the immediacy of my handwritten, double-spaced script. I have been possessive of the A4 black notebook. I have carried it in my bag, to work, on planes, to tables in cafés.

My fear now is that as I type something will be lost.

A connection.

A newly rediscovered connection.

With him.

Last year he was here.

Even as the plane circled the vast plains and patchwork fields.

Walking the long, straight streets, past thick kerb-side grass and wooden houses.

He was here.

I knew he would be.

In oak-panelled rooms, along corridors of gray, austere men,
Passing tan leather chairs occupied by sleeping students,
As people clustered, engaged in animated conversation,
In the smell of coffee and fast food,
In the spring sunshine –
After the dreary English winter it had been enough to make me sing –

He was here.

And then, as I composed myself that Friday morning to tell stories about him
In this room, by this chair, at that door

He was here.

In me.

In my body.

Alive.

This year, I am here, walking the same streets, past the cafés and restaurants,

Revisiting relationships,
Reminding me of his presence then

And assaulting me with his absence now.

This paper is about loss.

As both the event and the sense of the lost become distant,
When they fade,
Retreating
Into absence.

This paper is about my father.

I carry with me other men's stories about their fathers: Rolling's, whose trilogy (Rolling, 2004a, 2004b and 2006) works through the fractured relationship with his late father in pursuit of new identities; and Pelias', whose father he carries with him, "always a reminder" (Pelias, 1999: 17; see also Pelias, 2006) ; and Adams' (2006), whose story of the relationship with his (still living) father finds, to his surprise, love alongside the hate.

This paper is about my father, and folds in (Deleuze, 2004 and 2006) others' fathers too. "There are no individual statements, there never are." (Deleuze, 2004: 42)

These remind me of him:

Trimming the hedge. I stand on a low wall at the front of my house, carefully working with the wire hooked over my shoulder as he taught me. My father had one leg paralysed from polio. The hedge that he would trim was much taller than mine, and he would balance unsteadily at the top of a stepladder.

Mowing the lawn. I reluctantly plough the lines into the grass and remember how, stick-less, he would hop, skip and jump after the speeding mower. It always seemed an arm's length ahead, and, like an enthusiastic toddler, risked escaping his protection and causing damage.

The grass at the edges of the lawn and along the flower beds becomes, eventually, too long to ignore. I do the job as quickly as I can, squatting, and remember him methodically clipping the long grass on the bank at the front of our house, sat on the ground, useless right leg folded under him, left leg stretched out in front. Occasionally he would pause to wave the flies away from his face.

His soft, black leather briefcase. He would empty it at the table on his return from work, to produce newspapers and, on Fridays, apple pie. A regular gift from Mrs Newell, the cook where he worked. Mrs Newell's apple pie. I wonder now how it survived the journey from London each week to emerge intact from the depths of his battered case. My son has the briefcase, stuffed with mementoes from schooldays.

Hymn singing, especially at Christmas. Visiting Worcester cathedral, and hearing the choir rehearsing, I think I hear his strong tenor voice. I stop to listen.

Does loss, through its pain, speak of connection? Loss still has presence. My father's absence from my life feels bleak; writing, an attempt to traverse absence's barren landscape. Loss is conscious of what has been present, is resonant of the lost. With absence there is forgetting.

The dictionary: Absence – from the Latin, 'to be away' – the fact of somebody's not being in a particular place. Presence – from the Latin, 'to be in front of'. Loss – the feeling of sadness or emptiness at the absence of something (Soukhanov, 1999).

He is away for much of the time now; not with me, not in front of me.

And these, too, remind me of him:

Sunshine

James Bond

Swimming in the sea

Always. Always swimming.

Always swimming.

But

Is that all? Only these?

Surely there were more once

They are slipping away

Sometimes, it is as if he had never been here.

No longer loss

Absence.

A young woman recently spoke to me, as her counsellor, about her loss:

Amy is 25. Her partner died six months ago. One September evening he had been drinking. Burdened by debt, distraught at being denied access to his two children and,

Amy imagines (because she can never know), with not enough hope and too much anger, he picked up his long, black, studded leather belt in the early hours, formed it into a noose and hung himself.

Next morning, Amy, who had spent the night with friends, walked along the street towards his flat, saw ambulances and knew.

Today, she knows only that the early summer sun reminds her of time spent with him.

And he is not here. He is not here.

But – more unbearable – she imagines she will, in time, find another place. And catch herself, as the grass begins to grow, not remembering.

No longer loss.

Absence.

Father story (1)

He and his older sister are on an expedition aboard a large, gray, rubber dinghy. The heavy, pale stone wall curves, stretching from the shore behind and looping to enclose the fishing boats moored in the harbour. The two children – eight and twelve – are happy. It's summer, early in the annual family holiday to the Dorset seaside town. The weeks stretch ahead forever.

If it is high tide, in the mornings, he and his father, towels slung around their necks, will make the long hike to the beach. (At low tide the journey down the beach to the water is too far.) The boy will walk to the right of the father, so that he does not impede the father's stick on his left, but also in order to shield the father's bare right leg from stares. They will not encounter many people so the father's self-consciousness will be lessened.

They will swim together for a time, then the father will head further out, left leg kicking. The son will wait on the beach, watching him submerge and emerge, a six foot three inch, dark-haired, whale.

His sister calls to their father and older brother aboard the second dinghy. "Ice creams! Come on! We'll go and get them!" She rows over and their father reaches to give him, the youngest ('Titch') the money. Titch turns up his palm to receive it. He clutches, but not tightly enough. Somehow the coins slip out into the water and are gone.

The holiday mood is broken. His father growls his disappointment and irritation. Titch is mortified.

There will be ice creams that afternoon, and a rapprochement, but not for a while.

What does writing my father do? What does writing Amy do? What does writing perform? Does it revive?

“How do stories revive a life?”

enquires Rolling (Rolling, 2006, personal communication):

“Why does life collapse into shells of our familiar stories? Is it so that new cities of meaning can be built upon our ruins? Are new stories the seedbeds of new life after death?”

Father story (2)

He calls out. I have tried to sleep but can't, knowing that the call will come. A small voice, quiet, sad, indicating discomfort.

I'm by his bed.

“I'm sorry to wake you,” he says. He is on his back, which is uncomfortable for him.

“That's fine, Dad. Hold on a moment.”

I lift up the duvet and take the rubber strip, laid across the bed underneath him to assist turning him.

“OK. Ready?”

I pull firmly so that he turns onto his left-hand side in one movement.

When I first did this shift, as our mother recovered from an operation, this turning would take half a dozen attempts. I would sweat with anxiety at my responsibility. I am anxious still, frightened by not knowing and by the prospect of failing.

My brother and I joke that even when it comes to looking after our father at night it matters which of us does it better. Our sister is a nurse so we don't include her in the competition.

I traverse to the foot of the bed and settle his right leg on his left, a cushion between to soften bone on bone.

“How's that?”, I ask and kiss him lightly.

Alone in the bed next door I listen, trying to settle, half sleeping, half alert to the next call. When I leave in the morning it will be with a measure of relief.

I write new stories. New, old stories. To revive him, in my and your imaginations:

“Extend the hand, write, and it's all over with the end.” (Cixous, 2005: 97)

Is it? Or is there simply another end that follows?

Father story (3)

It is the evening meal. There is talk about the days we have had. I am soon to leave home for the summer to teach English to Italians.

"I've been thinking about this for a while. I want to do it before I go away: Tomorrow I am going to go into town. I am going to get my ear pierced. "

Silence. Moments pass. The dog stretches and sighs. Dogs the land over stretch and sigh.

My father places his cutlery onto his plate and looks at me. His face is impassive, his words clipped:

"Well, it's up to you of course but if you go ahead and do that, don't bother coming home. Go straight to your Italians."

He resumes eating. My mother and sister stare at him.

I smile to myself. He and I both know that it is the best thing he could have said.

I feel the elation of rebellion.

At last.

I return home next evening sporting a neat, gold stud.

I am 23.

Does writing stories about my father create him? Does writing him create me, re-cast in light newly shed by both my words and my awareness of your gaze?

Does writing about my father assuage my guilt that I forget him? That my life continues without him?

Does writing about him alleviate my fear? My fear of what his becoming distant, his growing absence, means?

Oblivion.

Wishful thinking (1)

I walk into the garage, past the carefully parked car, into the order and neatness at the far end. The darkness is illuminated by a naked bulb, which casts light onto the square tin boxes of nails and screws, each box labelled according to size and type, and the

wood-handled tools hung on the breeze block wall. 'Any Questions' plays on the transistor radio.

He sits on a mat on the floor, in front of a clumsy chest of drawers, drawing sandpaper across a spark plug, the lawn mower beside him; his right leg folded, left leg outstretched.

"Hello, Titch." He switches off the radio.

"Hi, Dad."

"What's up? What I can I do for you?" (Is this how he talked? Would he have said it like this? Why can't I remember?)

I hesitate.

"Come back. Stay. Talk to me. Explain. Don't leave. Help." Any of these would do.

Dad blows on the spark plug. "There, that should do it." Begins to re-fit the plug. Looks up and, with warmth, says

"Don't be silly. You know I can't do that."

Does writing make me feel better? Does it help me to get a hold?

Mazza (2001) describes his use of poetry in therapy, discussing how he encourages clients to develop a story about loss: a story but not a last story.

These stories about my father are maybe a way of reassuring me that they are not his last stories, that there are more to be told.

Father stories (5, 6 and 7)

I am speaking to my wife on the phone. I've been away from home for two nights.

"I'm afraid we're losing him."

"Bring me home something of his," she asks. "A shirt maybe."

When I get home, the day he has died, my eleven-year-old daughter takes the shirt with her to bed. After a few weeks she gives it to me. For months I, too, hold it against my face to breathe him in. Three years on the shirt lies in a drawer. Though no longer redolent of him I cannot bring myself to throw it away.

And

Early on week-end mornings when we were little my brother, sister and I used to climb between my barely-awake parents, only to push my father out of bed, inexorably nudging him with our six small feet until he theatrically tumbled to the floor.

His revenge – which we awaited with exquisite anticipation – was to move to the foot of the bed, reach under the bedclothes for our wriggling feet and, one by one, pull us down, squealing and giggling, till we, too, thumped onto the floor. My mother would remain serenely under the bedclothes.

I used to do this with my children. I told them whose game it was.

And

I remember, the summer before taking up my first teaching post (the earring, Italians, rebellion summer):

On the table at my parents' house were scattered my grandmother's effects. I had not been close to her and, preoccupied with youth, had seen her only occasionally those last few years as she drifted into dementia. During my childhood she had been a festival visitor – birthdays, Christmas, Easter – staying a few strained days before departing, leaving sweets, chocolate and discomfort. I had never fully understood the difficulties she caused, seeing her, as a small child, as intriguing and generous. More recently, by my late teens, I had begun to find her curiously uninterested.

Scanning the table I noticed the pack of letters tied with a rubber band. I was drawn to their uniformity and the neatness with which they were folded; and to the familiar jagged handwriting. (At boarding school, every Monday I would receive a letter from him, and every Thursday one from my mother. The headmaster would call out my name and as I approached he would flick the letters the length of the oak table, their handwriting spinning towards me. Their stories of home would be a brief reminder of where I was. Then I would be distracted by some school task, forget again and be happy.)

I removed the rubber band and took the first letter, postmarked June 1947 from the Isle of Wight, where for two years he convalesced from the polio he had contracted while on national service. As I read it became clear that he had written these letters at least weekly to his mother in London. He detailed for her how he was dealing with the therapy – the carpets he had been making, the swimming that he was beginning to attempt again, the discomfort of the callipers, the consultations with the doctors. He wrote of his plans and hopes for the future.

I remember the voice that I heard in those letters as I sat at the table, how struck I was by its warmth. I recall not recognising it, being shocked by it. Talking to and about his mother throughout my life I had only ever heard him guarded and resentful. Wounded.

I remembered that during his convalescence his mother had never visited. Not once. In two years, and London barely a hundred miles. A twenty year old with polio.

And yet she kept his letters.

Her absence and his loss? Or her loss too?

This paper is autoethnography, seeking to embrace a research ethic that uses the 'I' to look beyond, to others (Pelias, 2005: 419), aspiring through the 'I' for the 'I' to disappear (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 33).

This is performative autoethnography. It seeks to speak with and to the body, to represent embodied scholarship, to be animated. It aspires to "keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in scholars' abstractions" (Pelias, 2005: 418). "Flesh to flesh scholarship" (Spry, 2001: 726).

Father story (8)

My mother recently gave me a copy of a curriculum vitae and job application letter that my father wrote in 1977 when he was 50 (and I was 17). He did not get (or did not take) the job. In the space headed "Autobiographical Section", where it asks him to describe himself, his personality, attributes and motives as accurately as he can, he writes in that familiar script:

"This is always difficult as it is so easy to be conceited or over modest. On the plus side I am told I have a commanding presence, a gentlemanly bearing and a natural courtesy and kindness. I am clear thinking and have an immense capacity for detail and an ability to make quick and accurate judgements (though not always of people). I command respect. Children love me.

On the other side I am impatient and a little intolerant. I tend to prefer my own company to that of a crowd. I do not easily trust people. I tend to be a perfectionist – my thinking is in terms of black and white with very few grey areas!

I am not motivated by money or power but rather by the wish to put such abilities as I have to the maximum use."

I nod my head as I read this. I say, yes, that's right, that's right, that's what I saw too. I grin at his aside that his judgement was sharp "though not always of people". I think that he probably was impatient and perhaps more than a little intolerant. (Two familiar swipes were that both history and Prince Charles are a waste of time.) I am slightly taken aback by the boldness of the statement that children loved him. (And he didn't mention that dogs loved him too, despite his indifference to them.)

The next heading invites him to state what has given him most satisfaction in life or been his main achievement:

"In my opinion there are only three things that give worthwhile and lasting satisfaction in life. They are being at peace with oneself by attaining a proper relationship with one's God, having a happy married and family life and fulfilling oneself in whatever one tries to do. I'm still working hard at the first of these; the second I have reached (and it is therefore the answer to this question) and the third may be nearer complete realisation as a result of this application!"

I don't remember his having religious faith as this point. As he got older I became aware of this side to him, but I am surprised when I read this. And I say fair enough to the third part of the final sentence: he had to say this, even if it was not entirely honest. It was a job application, after all.

Finally, he is asked to say what his outside interests and activities are:

"I am a keen bridge player and my wife and I play as often as we can.

We try to give some help and comfort to the elderly at a local old persons' home (weekly concerts, outings, committee work, etc.). What other time I have left I devote to involving myself in whatever my children's current interests may be and to maintaining house and garden."

In the interests of pursuing the highest ethical standards I have to tell you that he was indeed a keen bridge player, and he and my mother certainly played regularly. And he was always interested in what we did (though I object to the inference of flightiness in his use of the word "current".) However, his cheek knows no bounds: he never did help at the old peoples' home. My mother did that, with help from the three of us during school holiday times. But not him.

This writing is an attempt at flight; an effort to gain leverage, to leave where I am now, and in that sense, to *betray* (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002): an endeavour to deterritorialise and not reterritorialise (Deleuze and Parnet 2002).

Wishful thinking (2):

I run, stretching into the strides, reaching out further each time, trying for just a touch more speed. I am not a sprinter and my middle-aged limbs allow me even less pace, but it is still a good feeling to try.

I catch sight of a shadow beside me. He matches my stride.

I have never seen him run before.

(3854 words)

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